

Testimony by Christopher Jones, Chairman
Great Lakes Priorities Initiative
and
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before the
Subcommittee on Water Resources and the Environment
of the
House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

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Mr. Chairman, members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the significant need for a coordinated and adequately funded restoration program for the Great Lakes.

The Great Lakes are an ecological treasure. They contain roughly 20% of the fresh surface water on the planet. They supply drinking water for millions of people, provide habitat for fish and wildlife, and encompass many sensitive ecological features such as estuaries and coastal wetlands.

The Great Lakes contribute substantially to the national economy, both as a passageway through which American goods reach the global marketplace and as a recreational destination that anchors a thriving tourism industry. For Ohio alone, Lake Erie tourism is a \$7 billion business, supporting well over a quarter-million jobs. The waters of the Great Lakes and their tributaries spawned the cities of America's industrial heartland, and continue to support manufacturing and other commercial ventures.

Recognizing the importance of the Great Lakes to the region's economy and quality of life, the Governors of the eight Great Lakes States formed a non-partisan partnership – the Council of Great Lakes Governors – to address in a cooperative manner our shared environmental and economic challenges. As the current chairman of the Council, Ohio Governor Bob Taft has led the Great Lakes Priorities Initiative. Its goal is to protect and restore our region's greatest natural resource through efficient, well-coordinated programs supported by adequate federal funding.

I should note that we are seeking this federal funding as a supplement to the state and local investment already taking place. A 2003 report by the GAO documents the fact that state and local spending on Great Lakes programs far exceeds the investment by the federal government. While we remain committed to doing our share, we cannot accomplish many urgently needed restoration goals without more federal participation.

In October, the Great Lakes Governors released a list of nine priorities for Great Lakes protection and restoration. They include:

- sustainable use of water resources;
- protecting human health;
- controlling pollution from diffuse sources;
- reducing persistent bio-accumulative toxics;
- stopping the introduction and spread of non-native aquatic invasive species;
- protecting coastal wetland and wildlife habitats;
- restoring Areas of Concern;
- improving information collection and dissemination;
- and adopting practices that protect the environment along with the recreational and commercial value of the Great Lakes.

The States are in the process of holding public workshops throughout the Region to solicit input on these priorities. We are hopeful that at the end of this process, we will be able to represent to Congress that this is a consensus list of priorities around which restoration funding can be structured. I am encouraged by the input we have received thus far that this will, in fact, be possible.

In the meantime, recognizing that passage of a comprehensive restoration bill is some time into the future, the Governors have developed a list of short term funding priorities for consideration by Congress in the current appropriation cycle. The list was presented to the leaders of the Appropriations Committees within the past few days and copied to the members of the region's Congressional delegation. I have included a copy with my testimony.

In addition, the Council hosted a meeting in Chicago ten days ago that brought together policy makers from the States and relevant federal agencies, our Canadian partners, representatives of the region's mayors, environmental NGOs, and members of the business community. That group reached an unprecedented level of consensus about short-term priorities for Great Lakes restoration and agreed on a process for quickly coordinating the many long-term restoration plans already in existence. I am particularly pleased that the group itself articulated the need for better coordination among Great Lakes stakeholders and appears ready to work closely together to present a focused vision and plan of action to Congress.

Among the short-term priorities identified by this broad based group are the following items, which correspond well with the funding requests from the Great Lakes Governors:

Passage of a strong, effective bill to control nuisance aquatic invasive species.

Invasive species are changing the ecology of the Great Lakes in ways we don't fully understand. And the change is ongoing, as a new invasive species is introduced to the Great Lakes ecosystem each year. Technical and policy experts are in agreement that this is a serious problem, but one that can be managed with the right controls and the funding to implement them. The longer we delay in putting these controls in place, however, the more serious the problem will become.

The Great Lakes Governors have urged Congress to quickly reauthorize and fund the National Aquatic Invasive Species Act. Great Lakes stakeholders echo that request, and further emphasize the need for a strong bill, such as S. 525 and H.R. 1080, which include provisions that address the specific challenges faced by the Great Lakes.

Particularly vital is funding to construct, operate and maintain the dispersal barriers in the Chicago Ship and Sanitary Channel, to ward off the entry of the Asian Carp into the waters of the Great Lakes. The \$8 million cost will protect a Great Lakes fishery that far exceeds that in value on an annual basis.

Increased federal funding for wastewater infrastructure. I know the subcommittee recently heard testimony regarding the need for additional investment in drinking water infrastructure. The need is equally great when it comes to sewers and related infrastructure. As you may recall, U.S. EPA's gap analysis showed a \$525 billion shortfall between current levels of spending and the projected need for water infrastructure investment over the next 20 years. Clearly, this need cannot be met without the increased participation of the federal government.

One of the major threats to human health in the Great Lakes and their tributaries comes from combined sewer overflows (CSOs), which discharge untreated sewage during heavy rainfalls. The Wet Weather Water Quality Act of 2000 authorized \$1.4 billion nationally to begin to address this issue, but none of those funds has been appropriated. In the meantime, communities with combined sewers are under a federal mandate to prepare long-term control plans that outline how they will eliminate CSOs over the next 15 to 30 years. The price tag is enormous – an estimated \$1.6 billion in Cleveland, and \$2.4 billion in Chicago, just as an example.

Costly as they are, CSOs are only one of the water infrastructure challenges faced by local communities. From aging wastewater treatment plants to failing on-lot septic systems, the most advanced nation in the world is struggling to manage its sewage. America deserves better than unsanitary conditions that harken back to the disease-ridden days of long ago. Increased funding for the State Revolving Loan Funds that finance wastewater projects would be a good step toward meeting our infrastructure needs.

Appropriate funding for the Legacy Act. President Bush has proposed to increase Legacy Act funding from \$10 million in the current budget to \$45 million. The Great Lakes Governors urge Congress to make this appropriation, which more closely approximates the authorized funding level for this law.

The Legacy Act specifically addresses residual contaminants in the Areas of Concern, Great Lakes tributaries where contaminated sediments perpetuate problems such as fish deformities and limitations on fish consumption. Legacy Act spending can make a very positive difference.

In the Black River at Lorain, Ohio, fish were plagued by lip and liver tumors caused by exposure to chemicals in the river sediments. People were warned to avoid contact with the water and sediments in the river. Then the river was dredged to remove the contaminants, and its condition greatly improved. On Earth Day, Governor Taft visited the Black River to announce that it is safe for recreational uses and that U.S. EPA has issued a declaration that natural processes are all that is necessary to completely restore the health of the fish population. This is a graphic demonstration of how Legacy Act funding can help to meet the fishable, swimmable goals of the Clean Water Act.

While the Great Lakes Governors strongly support the passage of comprehensive restoration legislation, they also recognize the overriding need for better coordination among local, state and federal programs so that everyone's investments are well-spent. The stakeholder meeting the Governors sponsored in Chicago recently represented both an acknowledgement of this need and a step toward meeting it. The region's stakeholders expressed interest in forming an advisory group, as called for in S.1398 and HR 2720, even before the bills advance in Congress, to coalesce the many restoration plans already in existence into a single vision for long-term, comprehensive restoration strategies.

On Tuesday, President Bush signed an Executive Order directing U.S. EPA Administrator Mike Leavitt to convene a regional forum on Great Lakes restoration. Governor Taft and Chicago Mayor Richard Daley joined Administrator Leavitt in making this announcement, and they will assist him in calling together a broad-based group that can provide a strong regional voice to advocate for comprehensive restoration of the Great Lakes.

In addition, the President's order seeks to improve coordination among the many federal agencies with responsibilities on the Great Lakes. Given that the GAO report identified lack of coordination as a primary stumbling block, this is also an important step.

The Great Lakes Governors welcome the President's recognition of the importance of the Great Lakes to the nation as a whole, and his willingness to commit his Administration to work with them and the Great Lakes community toward a well coordinated restoration agenda. It is the hope and expectation of the region's governors that the work of the group Administrator Leavitt will convene will ultimately lead to adequate federal funding to implement its restoration strategies.

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, our pledge to you is that we will put the investment we ask Congress to make in the Great Lakes to good use. We will restore this global ecological treasure to its highest and best use, so that the 40 million people who live in the Great Lakes basin will be sustained by a healthy ecosystem, so that Americans and travelers worldwide can safely enjoy the recreational benefits of the Great Lakes, so that endangered and threatened species in the basin can thrive, so that American businesses can continue to use the Lakes as a shipping portal to the world. These are diverse uses, but this incredible resource can support all of them and more. We must simply take care of it.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.